

BRIGADIER GENERAL

JAMES P. COMBS

The Commander of the California Army National Guard's 49th Combat Support Command speaks candidly about the current mobilizations and family and employer support.

He's the first commander of the California Army National Guard's 49th Combat Support Command and a veteran of Vietnam in his 27th year of military duty. He also has the reputation of being an excellent strategic planner with a can-do attitude and the energy of a nuclear power plant. Brigadier General James P. Combs also has a penchant for soldier care and definite opinions regarding current mobilizations and the importance of family and employer support. Major Stan Zetzarski managed to obtain an interview with General Combs during one of the busy general's visits to the California Army National Guard's Army Aviation Support Facility at Stockton in early March.

GRIZZLY: You are the Assistant Division Commander for the 91st Division (Training Support), United States Army Reserve, in addition to your role as the Commander of the California National Guard's 49th Combat Support Command. Do you feel

your dual role has significantly impacted the relationship between the Army and its components?

COMBS: No military mission can be undertaken without the components' fullest corporation. If it's not a team effort, the soldiers will be the ones that lose. I believe that Major General Paul Monroe and Major General Daniel Balough, the former commander of the Army Reserve's 91st Division, presented me a unique opportunity that was, in effect, an experiment. It was through their foresight, working with the Chief of Staff of the Army and the directors of both the National Guard Bureau and United States Army Reserve Command, that allowed this to transpire. After serving one year in a pilot configuration, all United Army Reserve training divisions adopted this system. So, I now have the distinct privilege of lashing together the capabilities of the Army Reserve with the deploying units, thereby increasing our units' combat capability. So

the victor, in my judgement, has been the soldier.

GRIZZLY: When the 49th Combat Support Command was created, it appeared that the concept to rotate units in their entirety to replace and relieve active duty units from missions around the world evolved from the division-teaming concept and other Army initiatives to improve interoperability between the Guard and the Army. It was expected to have a high operational tempo. Has the concept worked?

COMBS: Let me set the record straight. The concept of the 49th Combat Support Command is the idea of one individual, and that is Major General Paul D. Monroe. Soon after he became The Adjutant General, he said that he wanted me to create a headquarters for all non-divisional organizations within the state.

GRIZZLY: For what purpose?

COMBS: His purpose was to have a focused, division-level staff, dedicated to maintaining the readiness of these non-divisional



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PHOTOS BY SFC ROBERT PACK

high-priority units. General Monroe, in effect, loaned me resources in the first year that began in September 1999, and asked us to organize the 49th Combat Support Command.

GRIZZLY: But, was the 49th officially recognized at that time?

COMBS: We lacked formal authorization for almost two years. Once the National Guard Bureau recognized the command, we then did a very measured approach at staffing the headquarters so that we could enhance available training resources, as well as effectively compete for resources outside the state.

GRIZZLY: How has your staff performed so far? How would you measure their performance?

COMBS: Well, I like to look to results as a measure. If the measure of performance is the growth of the organization—the organization grew by more than 1,600 personnel. It had all the new division Army redesign units assigned to it. We took many units from scratch and built them into a viable and deployable unit. The best litmus test on that is that we are deploying several brand new units that were organized over the last two years.

GRIZZLY: In the recent deployments, you, The Adjutant General, and other California National Guard leadership, arranged for additional annual training for units most likely to deploy. You wanted to ensure that they would have the skills necessary to survive wherever they go. Do you feel that this additional annual training was successful?

COMBS: Yes. This mobilization is one of the best team efforts I have observed since I have been in the California National Guard. It is a classic demonstration of what collaborating teams can do to produce effective results. When you can take a brand new unit from a start to a full run—ready for a full combat mission—in two years, that is a huge success for everybody that touched the process. There has been a sense of purpose and direction that was truly inspiring.

GRIZZLY: Did this additional training create additional pressure on families and employers? If so, how did you handle it?

COMBS: There is no question that anytime you're trying to optimize the potential for success, you use every resource available. Ultimately the ones that pay the price are those who are deploying. And they did pay a price for that—there's no doubt about it. We aggressively talked to every family. We held family symposiums in virtually every

case. We visited units and their families, and we provided family days to bring awareness to the process. When they understood that this is the largest deployment of the California National Guard since Korea, it became clear that this was not business as usual. This was a dramatic change in the way we have been doing business. Everyone wants success and survivability for our soldiers, and the price—even though it was difficult—was time away from families and employers. The families and employers have demonstrated at every turn that they are behind our soldiers 100 percent. They support our soldiers unwaveringly.

GRIZZLY: Do you and your staff have a plan to sustain this support after the soldiers deploy and redeploy?



PHOTO BY SFC ROBERT PACK

BG James P. Combs discusses the recent deployment of the California Army Guard's "Chinook" unit with a CH-47 mechanic, during a visit to the California Army National Guard's Army Aviation Support Facility in Stockton.

COMBS: Absolutely! The major focus after a unit leaves is the family support infrastructure. We plan to train those soldiers that do not deploy with the unit to support communication between the family, employers, and this command through the Unit Public Affairs Representative Program. I have twelve subordinate headquarters. Their only mission is to assure

the continued development of the units while they are deployed.

GRIZZLY: How will they accomplish that?

COMBS: We are going to recruit aggressively, retain aggressively, we are going to institute the most well-resourced family activities and individual training programs that we've ever seen for a stay-behind force. When the units get back, they're going to be more ready and more capable than when they left. Our soldiers are going to stay with us, because we took care of the family and their employers when they were gone.

GRIZZLY: You and your Command Sergeant Major, Sally Donahe, both have sons who are in the National Guard who could possibly deploy. Has this changed your outlook about deploying soldiers?

COMBS: I will be honest with you, it has tempered my outlook. Command Sergeant Major Donahe's son has deployed to Kuwait and returned. He and the other soldiers in his unit understand the measure of selfless service required. They are very quick to point out the weaknesses and the strengths of our culture. As a result, they have been a great resource for helping us identify—from a Private First Class or Specialist perspective—what we need to do to improve our Guard. Yes, it has changed my perspective. I have absolutely no reservation should my son have to deploy. I want him to deploy with the California National Guard more than any other organization. I'm sure that Command Sergeant Major Donahe feels the same way. I'm a Vietnam combat veteran. I'm in my 27th year of duty. This has to be my proudest moment.

GRIZZLY: That sparks a question. How would you compare the current deployments with your deployment to Vietnam?

COMBS: I believe that these soldiers are more motivated, they have more understanding of their mission, and they are more capable than we were when we deployed to Vietnam. I would have been fearful sending my son into combat in Vietnam. I have no reservations for this mission.

GRIZZLY: This is your opportunity to address our National Guard families, civilian employers, and elected leaders. What is the most critical message that you would like these audiences to understand?

COMBS: I want them to understand that our soldiers need them. I would like for them to consider themselves serving with that soldier and sharing in their success. There is no question that their support makes them a formidable part of our success. The support that they have shown has been phenomenal. 🐾